

INTERNATIONAL BACCALAURATE DIPLOMA PROGRAMME

ENGLISH B EXTENDED ESSAY

“How does Alice Walker portray the oppressed African American woman’s life style in Georgia during the early 1900’s?”

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1. Introduction

The Colour Purple is written by Alice Walker as a means of enlightening the inner workings of the deep American South between wars. Although The Colour Purple is a story embedded with deep interconnections between many contradicting lifestyles what it's really about is women struggling to find their place in a society that deeply despises and undervalues them. This struggle of women is mainly interpreted by the main character that is Celie –no last name given- whom is the narrator of most of this story.

The narrative and the meaning behind the book can be divided into five parts with each focusing on one aspect of Celie that did not develop in the pressure of the environment she grew up in. Before further explaining what these other characters mean to Celie what first must be established is why Celie is different from all the other characters in the book as well as why she is the way she is. This part will be exploring how her upbringing was effective in her personality and actions whilst she grew up and basically continues to grow up. “Against the universality of stigma, studies across the globe present different pictures of stigma experiences in different countries and communities.” (Corrigan and Watson, p.28)

The purpose of this essay is to explore the changes gone through by the main character Celie by focusing on how the other three female characters with similar backgrounds to hers while also highlighting her struggles mainly caused by her race and gender. Celie's growth however cannot be fit into just these three characters however important they may be. The environment that Celie grew up in and the implications of growing up in a society where she was the lowest class a person could be also had a massive effect on how her personality was first shaped growing up.

The environment in question is the mostly the male dominated and corrupted world but also the people who allow it to continue. “Published in 1964, this study of the Republican Party

in Georgia during the nineteenth century shows the party as a failed and frustrated institution. Its brief moment of power during Reconstruction burdened its future with the legacy of the abuses of that period.” (Shadgett, description) People seeing, observing and even practicing this oppression are actually the ones at fault as opposed to the society as they are the ones making it. The oppression and prejudice are not un-recognizable as there are many articles written highlighting the behaviour such as “The Nature of Political Corruption, Brooks, 1909” where the insignificance of the traits used for discriminatory purposes are mentioned as well as the class distinction being the main reason behind the political corruption. “In this period of booming growth, the nation experienced a dramatic presidential election.” (Library of Congress) There are many characters making statements that are aware of this type of oppression “You got to fight them, Celie, she say. I can’t do it for you. You got to fight them yourself” (Walker, p.22) but it is just that, statements. No characters except for the oppressed like Sofia and Nettie seem to want to change the environment.

Although Celie is the embodiment of how women were supposed to be in that day and age, not each and every character is like her case in point: Nettie, Sofia and last but not certainly least Shug Avery. All three characters mentioned are of similar physical characteristics: being a black woman in a day of age where white men ruled the world. The world they ruled being only for people they deemed necessary. However from the far right entered few politicians considering the rights of their citizens, one such example is Hoke Smith also known as the progressive governor of Georgia whose administration lasted just two years. He is known most for going against the wishes of both Georgia’s wealthy citizens and the principles of the then General Assembly.(Grantham, p423) But all three of these women in one way or another realised the oppression and overcame it.

2. Celie's Early Life and Family Growing Up (Nettie):

Family pressure had affected Celie, mostly by Nettie- Celie's sisterhood as in how them being separated tore both of them apart both mentally and physically. Around the 1900s was when mental health was starting to be recognized among crowds due to research such as "A CONSIDERATION OF THE NEED OF BETTER PROVISION FOR THE TREATMENT OF MENTAL DISEASE IN ITS EARLY STAGE" (The American Journal of Psychiatry, 1908) (Yerkes and Berry, p.37) which became popular due to people being able to relate themselves to the people in treatment.

Their connection is established pretty strongly from the start as evidenced by the climax of the book where it is Nettie who is narrating via sending letters to her sister that is missing in her eyes. After Celie finds out where Mr. keeps Nettie's letters is when the narration starts (Walker, page 113). Their bond is what gets each through times where they are struggling to keep their heads up. They write to each other during times where both of them need something to hold onto and holding onto their sisters are the only thing on their mind. "He said because of what I'd done I'd never hear from you again, and you would never hear from me. I was so mad myself I was shaking" (Walker, page 114) From this quote it can be deduced that although Mr. wants to keep the sisters apart they will find one way or another to try and reach each other. Them not knowing if either one is alive but still holding onto the other being alive and living for them is evidence enough.

Celie is one of –if not the most- obedient person in the novel despite being the main character. And what choice but being obedient does she have being a poor black woman. Throughout the story we are told time and time that she is not one to stand up for herself or others no matter if it means her harm or not. Due to the environment she grew up in she is not comfortable with standing out or being in the line of fire, she does not care what happens to her

as long as her sister is safe. “All I thought about was Nettie. How she could come to me if I marry him...” (Walker, p.11) Another reasoning for why Celie’s introverted nature was caused by the environment is due to the fact that the novel takes place right before the first world war as the Archduke of Austria had just been assassinated and the US was being pressured into joining the war. This sudden act resulted in the migration rates skyrocketing especially to cities that people deemed to be more protected due their populations. (Ozay, 2010)

Aside from her there are many female characters that Alice Walker focused on the during the duration of the story that symbolise many of the areas that are struggles for Celie. Nettie the dearest sister of Celie is not present for most of the story as they are separated when she went to seek refuge from Georgia, leaving town with the mayor and her wife. These types of sudden migration were more than common in Georgia especially by people of colour due to the discrimination they faced combined with the more than extreme living conditions. The migrations although mostly happened to places outside of the borders of US as evidenced by articles such as “Social-Economic, Ethno-Cultural and Linguistic Outcomes of Migration (with the Example of One Georgian Village)” (Ketevan, Gotsiridze and Bertlani, 2020) which explored how migration effects the migrated country and as well as both the emigrants and immigrants.

The mayor and her wife are the people who adopted Celie’s children which makes it so that Nettie has even more the reason to leave with them. After Nettie leaves she begins to write letters to Celie as she is the only person she is holding onto from her past life in Georgia. (Walker, page 114) In the letters Nettie tells Celie about her whereabouts and everything she is doing even though she doesn’t know if she receives them or not let alone not knowing whether she is even alive. This can be deduced from “But always, no matter what im doing, I am writing to you.” (Walker, page 140) and “I imagine that you really do get my letters and that you are writing me back.” Where Nettie clearly expresses a sense of need towards hearing from her

sister. (Walker, page 140) Nettie questions this notion many times during both her monologues and during the letters she writes to Celie where she emphasizes she is now not even writing the letters to Celie anymore and her real goal is to just hold on to the idea of her at the very least.

Men in Celie's life have influenced her growing up. Celie was born as the oldest in a pretty dysfunctional family: to a mother that did not want her and to a father whom only saw her as her gender. (Walker, p.7) She is not close neither of her parents and we see her valuing Nettie only from her blood and immediate family members. After she is of apparently acceptable age, she is raped by his father. This action is what she holds on to for most of the narrative and her main reason for not trusting anyone let alone her family. After she turns 10-11 she is made to marry Mr. whom is not that different from her father. "It took him the whole spring, from March to June, to make up his mind to take me" (Walker, p.11) He uses Celie as an object for his desires whether it be sexual or domestic which is an indicator of how Celie uses the word take not in a metaphorical sense.

3. To Fit Or To Not Fit In (Sofia):

Celie's inner workings as well as her personality and pressure she is constantly under has a strong impact on her life. Especially through Sofia who is married to Harpo, Mr. 's son. Sofia as a black woman is not one to just put her head down and accept the roles the society gives her. In the quotations from pages 60 through 61: "That's right, say Harpo. But not Sofia. She do what she want, don't pay me no mind at all. I try to beat her, she black my eyes." and "Some women can't be beat, I say. Sofia one of them" Sofia being untouchable uncharacteristic to women. She is a representative of Celie's inner thoughts and inner personality being a rebellious figure in a society where all women need to do is keep their head low and thoughts in check. Sofia's husband Harpo is Mr. 's son as stated before which might imply he is of similar character: stubborn, cocky and aware of his advantages in that days' society as evidenced by quotes like "You ever hit her? Mr. ast. Harpo looked down at his hands. Naw suh, he say low,

embarrass. Well you specs to make her mind? Wives is like children. You have to let'em who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating.” (Walker, p.35)

Harpo on the contrary to his father was actually interested in dare one say in love with Sofia before everything happened between them. “He say, I tell her one thing, she do another. Never do what I say. Always back talk. To tell the truth, he sound a little proud of this to me.” (Walker, p.35) He as a child had an actual crush on her: “Harpo tell me all his love business now. His mind on Sofia Butler day and night.” (Walker, p.30) which she frequently told Celie and talked to her only after being encouraged by her let alone forcing her into a marriage and using her for needs like every other male character in the book. After they are married he is constantly pressured by his father to assert his dominance. (Walker, p.35) At first he is hesitant seeing as he actually valued Sofia but eventually gave into pressure. Their first altercation after Harpo finally gave into the pressure ended in him and Sofia getting into a physical fight. (Walker, p.37) The concept of a physical fight between a man and a woman was not unheard of at that time seeing as men were literally expected to beat their wives but this fight was much more complicated than just a one sided beat down As evidenced by the description of Harpo after their altercation (Walker, p.36) Sofia was the clear winner. Afterwards Sofia clearly proved herself to be not only a wife and a mother but also a person in her own right with her own ideologies, thoughts and personality.

Celie does not stand up to him or any other figure that has control over her until after she gets close to Shug Avery and Sofia. Sofia constantly told her she should stand up to him in situations like: “You got to fight them, Celie, she say. I can't do it for you. You got to fight them yourself” (Walker, p.22) even after she was ratted out to the authorities from going against the mayor's wife's word resulting in her going to jail and having to leave her kids behind. (Walker, p.81) Sofia's reaction to Celie finally giving Mr. a piece of her mind was also reminiscent of that of a proud sister: nodding and smiling at her every word. (Walker, p.173)

“Their unequal situation was clearly visible in the realization of their rights and duties.”
(Bubuteishvili,,p.51)

This lack of action may be uprooted in the setting as the novel takes place in a more conservative setting and also be related to the way society normalised this kind of behaviour however if that were the case we would not have white men as in Mr. valuing black women such as Shug Avery to the point of taking the risk of facing the law and the very society that favours him. To focus on Mr., his general demeanour is very true by the rules of society. We are reminded time and time that he is not fond of Celie nor Sofia for both similar and different reasons. The similarities come from attributes that they have no control over such as race and gender, but the differences are what the actual clues are. Sofia is a strong female figure not afraid to stand up for herself and for others in a similar situation This disobeying nature is what Mr. talks most about when presenting Sofia in a not so friendly nature. “Sofia think too much of herself anyway, he say. She need to be taken down a peg” (Walker, p.35) This dislike is not very surprising however what actually proves that people and Mr. in this case would not be the way they are if it weren't for the setting is how he treats Shug Avery.

Another example to a similar situation is the previously mentioned Sofia. Sofia is never narrated as a typical black woman in that days society. The outright desired black woman in that days' society would have been the exact opposite of that mentioned in the current “Equality of Spouses Accoring to Georgian Law” (Bubuteishvili, 2017) She was never a damsel in distress from the first page she was mentioned by Harpo to Celie to the first page Celie met her in person. Sofia was a strong character, an empowered woman through and through ever since the beginning which is opposite of ideal. All this information begs the question: then how come the son of Mr. Harpo fell in love with her nearly at first sight. The first Sofia is mentioned is by a young Harpo to her mother figure as “the girl he wants” (Walker, p.30). Although the use of “want” may seem possessive the emphasis on young is crucial and obviously context is

essential. Harpo is not even remotely close to his father which is the reason why Celie is the first one to find out about his little crush

At first glance Celie is worried as she is also under the misunderstanding that Harpo is going to be like his father, she is pleasantly surprised. (Walker, p31) Harpo talks about Sofia as if she is a person on her own which might sound insignificant by today's standards but is definitely not for then. Harpo then proceeds to describe her not mentioning her race or rarely any physical attributes. He describes her while also not hiding his own pure emotions and intentions. He talks about the way she speaks, the way she stands up for herself, the way she does not shy around him or anyone for that matter. After he is done speaking Celie is surprised as she has not heard any man speaking about a black woman or girl in that matter. (Walker, p.30) Celie proceeds to consult him through his crush on Sofia to the end. Before and after they are wed we see Harpo treat Sofia as her own person, we see him create an equal right household for the first time in the entirety of the novel. Their home life is similar to that of our time with both supporting themselves and each other and their children later on.

After they are married for some time however is when we see some change in behavioural patterns of Harpo. Harpo is not close to his father and is not similar to him in many ways. This however does not stop Mr. in starting to interfere with his home life. He starts pressuring him into the ways he was taught when he notices his way of life as unacceptable. Slowly but surely Harpo is torn between what he thought was right and what is being told by his father is right. After a while Harpo starts feeling unsure of what is right and wrong, unsure of the way his life should be. Although there was no detrimental change in his emotions, he is swayed in the direction of the expectations of the society and most importantly his father.

All this built up ends up in an instance where one of Sofia and Harpo's common disagreements turn into a show of strength when Harpo tries to hit Sofia. (Walker, p.62) Surprised and unsuspecting Sofia is of course taken aback but does not take long to respond.

This altercation ends in a non-one sided physical fight and their relationship only goes downhill from there as Harpo is pressured even more to be a ‘man’ and treat his ‘wife’ like she deserves. This drastic change in a seemingly ideal relationship was an ideal example on how the environment and setting may affect a person in such a way that even they cannot recognize themselves. Harpo went from a sweet boy with a crush, to marrying his first love to being so pressured that he felt the need to assert the dominance he did not want nor like in the first place

4. Discovering One’s Sense of Self (Shug Avery):

Societal norms and how society pressures women are also a factor. One of the women who influenced Celie is Shug Avery. Before Shug Avery was initially introduced to us as the idol of Celie. Although Celie never explicitly states her reasons for finding Shug Avery someone worthy of looking up to, her inner monologues whenever she is talked about near her give us an idea of why. Celie finds Shug Avery extremely lucky. Her reasoning is that she is a black woman seemingly living the life of a white man “Shug say, Girl, you look like a good time, you do. That’s when I notice how Shug talk and act sometimes like a man” (Walker, p.77). Although this comparison may not look extreme in this day and age, the difference in the living conditions. During that day, age, and setting and even in terms of human rights is non-negotiable as one is the most valued and the other not so much.

To give a brief insight into Shug Avery and her character plus her role in the novel: she is a singer mainly performing places that have their target audience as wealthy and rich white men, exploiting the corrupt society to her advantage. “In this article I use data from late nineteenth-century Georgia to examine several neglected issues: the multiple sources and targets of black threat, temporal changes in the relative size of the black population, and the rate at which black and white males were incarcerated” (Myers, p.373) The extent of the corruptness in society goes as far as the 1800’s and gets worse before it gets better. The adoption of the constitutional amendment in 1908 made Georgia the seventh southern state to take action

against any person of colour excluding whites taking place in anything relating to politics. (Anand,p.32) She is described to be extremely beautiful to the point people call her flawless (Walker, p.8) which also may have been a reason she caught Celie's eye from so far. When Celie first sees Shug Avery in real life she is completely star struck and head over heels for her. She is basically hypnotized by her presence and aura. Later when she actually meets her she is given the cold shoulder by her idol. Being heartbroken she still treats her with care and compassion as she is sick. "Ain't nothing wrong with Shug Avery. "She just sick. Sicker than anybody I ever seen. She sicker than my mama when she die. But she more evil than my mama and that keep her alive" (Walker, p.45) During the days of Shug trying to get back on her feet, we witness them growing a bond slowly but surely.

Shug teaches Celie many things about both Celie herself and life. Celie learns why Mr. is in love with her and meets a side of her destined for him only As they grow closer Celie finds herself attracted to her beyond the point of idolization and Shug finds herself feeling the same things. "He love looking at Shug. I love looking at Shug. But Shug don't love looking at but one of us. Him." (Walker, p.70) "I won't leave she say, until I know Albert won't even think about beating you." (Walker, p.72) Shug teaches a girl who was raped and sexually assaulted many times a girl who thought sex was just about the male pleasure, its beauty which opens the doors on a completely different concept: sexual identity. (Walker, p.74) Shug and Celie continue to explore each other both physically and mentally until a mutual trust is constructed on pure lust and love. "Shug say, Us each other's peoples now, and kiss me." (Walker, p.165) At this point although Mr. is completely aware of what is going on with both of them, he allows it just because he is in love with Shug. After this love was found out by Celie, Shug opens the door for a new opportunity of escaping her gruesome life in Georgia and leaving for someplace else.

While mentioning this altercation one does not skip the huge role Shug Avery plays in it. Shug is the one that first brings up how Celie is nothing in an uncensored manner. She belittles her until it leaves her shaking and muttering which unarguably has a huge effect on her. Shug mentions how if she were actually human and if she actually had a personality, she would be doing something—anything to change her situation. She would be going against the society like Sofia if she were anything other than a pathetic woman. Shug also states that she is ashamed to call her one (a woman) as she is a disgrace to them. Her words are what make Celie actually show emotion physically for the first time in the novel.

Everything he sees taboo or even plain wrong, all his morals and ideals are thrown off the window when Shug Avery is the one making requests. “You ain’t got it in you to understand, he say. I love Shug Avery. Always have, always will. I should have married her when I had the chance” (Walker, p.53) This is proven time and time again in instances where he lets Celie spend the night with Shug Avery knowing what they were going to do and internally disapproving it. (Walker, p.104) Given this behaviour pattern one might question the relevance as everything he is doing for Shug Avery is happening in the environment that is specifically mentioned to sort of brainwash people into being the worst version of themselves and to that we have a clear answer. The first time Shug Avery and Mr. met were before Mr. internalized the ideals pushed on him as a white male. They met in an underground bar where Mr. was a visitor—basically a nobody and Shug was what everyone was talking about with her flawless looks, voice and charm. Mr. was able to properly value Shug Avery before being caught up in the ideals pushed upon him by the society.

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